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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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## A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

### Abstract

Educational leadership was the goal that I set for myself when I began the Educational Leadership Program. That will continue to be part of my future goals as long as I am in the world of education. Along the way in this program I have had to answer the questions of my peers as well as the questions I had for myself. It is only after all the questions have been answered with confidence and knowledge that the goal will be met.

I look forward to the challenge and I am excited about the prospects ahead. There is so much I have learned and so much I want to try. No person can truly appreciate what this all means unless he/she, too, goes through this process. This process has been exciting because it has been a team of people helping me toward a goal. The end result of this process will come when I am putting a vision to work that involves the education of students, their parents, the surrounding community, but importantly the staff who educate that same school community. It is a vision I know many will be glad to see.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Christopher R. Lopez

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Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper and work double shifts. He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend money, replace personnel or upset any constituency. (Fullan, {1} 1996, NCREL database)

This quote says in writing, everything I thought about before deciding to pursue a career in educational leadership. I feel this is really how things are in the offices of principals in schools around the United States. However, this does not mean I am discouraged about my prospects of being a building principal. As a matter of fact, the thought excites me to no end. The whole idea of leading a group of people toward a goal with the outcome, the education of youth, is beyond what most people can comprehend. Sure there are going to be the problems mentioned in the quotation by Fullan (1996), but as he went on to say later, many of those problems can be worked around and used to one's advantage to truly make a difference in the school environment.

### Passion

Before a person can start down the path towards educational leadership, he/she must take a step back and really consider why he/she is looking to lead. In my experiences as a teacher, I have met several student teachers from various area colleges. It seems like each time I talk to these prospective teachers our conversations always turn to why they are in education. I always ask them if teaching is what they really want to do. If one of them answers that he/she is not

sure, then I tell this student teacher not to waste his/her time. The heart of the teacher had better be into teaching or he/she is just wasting the time of the students and really has no business being in a classroom. I am very passionate about education and I tell the student teachers that they should be too. How can anyone do a good job in the classroom if there is no passion in what that person does? In education, I value a teacher who is passionate about their subject and who would do anything to get students to learn that subject. Not enough teachers are like this.

When it comes to educational leadership, I feel the same way. Not enough principals are passionate about what they do. Now they may have started out being passionate, but maybe due to some setbacks mentioned by Fullan (1996), Erickson (2001), and Speck (1999) they have lost their passion. Over the course of the leadership program, professors have shown time and time again what happens to principals who lose their passion. Put simply, the passionless principal loses control of a building and the entire education process breaks down. In the end, the principal loses, the teachers lose, the students lose and eventually the surrounding community loses out on what should be a good educational experience. I firmly believe that if a person in a leadership role is passionate then maybe, just maybe, the school and school district might run a little smoother.

Daft (2002) gives the future leader a chance to see where he/she stands in leadership by giving a number of quizzes in his book. These quizzes are

designed, I think, as a way for the reader to evaluate himself/herself at each stage of discovery and determine whether or not he/she should move forward in their quest for a leadership role. I think Daft sees things the way I do. By giving some of these little quizzes, he can put a little thought, no matter what the score, into a person's head about why he/she is there. Like I said about teaching, if there is any doubt as to why you want to be a principal, get out of the field as soon as possible before something bad happens. For me, this book helped me see my potential as a leader and really helped me discover the true nature of being a school principal.

I want part of my vision in the future to include getting to the emotions and passion of the school community. I really want to see people enjoying the idea of being educated. H. Lynn Erickson (2001) wrote a book designed to help the future principal prepare for the job of being a curriculum leader. The book is perfect because it is not a book that preaches about the old ways of education, rather the book is one that I think Diane Payne (2001) would like because the opening section talks of making changes in a changing society. Keeping up with the changes of society is just one of the many things I want to work on in a principalship. This is a supreme challenge to any leader. However, trying to keep up with changes is a great way to stay fresh and up to date. The other reason I liked this book was because it talks of making people emotional about learning.

This is again perfect because when you think about it that is what schools should be about getting students to love learning.

Everyone has a love of something. If students could tie into that love and mesh it with school, I think students could definitely find a way to at least appreciate the education they receive. Getting to the passions of others is a tall task but not an impossible one. As principal, I will have to lead by example. This means I am going to have to get out there and get my hands dirty and show others what education means to me. Getting people to be passionate about something is not an overnight deal, I will have to work hard and long to ensure I reach as many people as possible. Passions are not stirred from the sideline they are stirred by participation. A person who has had his/her head, heart and soul moved in education should have no problem leading a building to greatness. I have been moved and it is time to pass my passion on to others.

### Humor

John Travolta played the title character in the movie Michael (1996) and he had a line that describes a little of the philosophy in my classroom, "You gotta learn to laugh." In leadership, a leader must learn to laugh. If the leader can't laugh at life, then he/she tends to be a bit miserable.

The therapy of laughter has been widely studied by people like Dr. Annette Goodheart, Ph.D. (2002). Dr. Goodheart says there are many benefits to laughter. She says people who laugh think clearer, live longer and have less stress.



Many of the administrators I have worked under have had great senses of humor, but others who did not. I felt the ones who did not have great senses of humor were not as effective leaders as the ones who did. From the day I started in the leadership program, I found the need to bring a laughing philosophy with me. I know I cannot go a day without laughing and with all the pressure the people in a building will be under, I figure it is my duty to make the whole process of teaching and learning fun. Charlton Heston said it best in the movie Ben Hur (1959): "We will laugh."

Getting humor into a workplace is not as easy as it sounds. What one person sees as funny another sees as inappropriate. I will have to walk the same fine line I have walked in eleven years of teaching. I must get to know the people around me before I can try the humor approach. This means doing some research on what the interests of the people are. Making visits to classrooms and events can help here. I can see how staff and students interact with one another and gauge what is appropriate and what is not. From there I can put together little presentations and packages that show how to get things done in a humorous way. My love of movies can be a big help here; I find a lot of my best material from the movies that others watch. This is a great opportunity to show how much I have in common with the people around me. In the end, I just want everyone to relax and do a great job. If humor is a way to motivate staff, then humor is the tool I have no problem using.

## Culture

One thing that really sticks out in the Educational Leadership Program is how each time I take a class with my cohort; the opening discussion seems to hover around why each student is there. Every time I have come home from the first day of each class I have had to ask myself if being a school principal is what I want to do. I have enjoyed the books each professor has brought to class to aid us in our quest to lead school buildings. What I have noticed over the course of the program is that each book gives really the same information only in different ways. Some people might see this as redundant, but I see it as a necessary part of growing into leadership. An actor can't play a part unless he/she can remember the lines by practicing them over and over again. A football player can't play in the game unless he studies his playbook many times over and then goes out and practices the plays in endless repetition. Redundancy has its advantages.

Redundancy is part of many school cultures. Seeing the same people over a period of many years is just one of the many cases of redundancy seen in a school culture. As a leader, it is going to be a major part of my job to ensure that within the redundant school culture there is a positive learning environment. I think it would be great for people to look at a building and just see a great culture at work. This would mean people knowing how to get along with one another working towards common goals. This of course can't happen unless the leader establishes a positive culture.

One of the books I have found to be most helpful is the book by Richard L. Daft (2002), The Leadership Experience. This book really breaks down leadership into all its neat little parts. At first I was a little overwhelmed by the scope of being a leader, however, once I saw what the book was really saying about leadership, I began to see that being a principal was a larger version of what I was already doing in the classroom. The principal must be prepared. Just like the week before school starts, a teacher prepares the classroom for the new students. Lessons are prepared, copies are made and bulletin boards are decorated. A good principal will do much of the same except on a much larger scale. A principal better be prepared or, just like the unprepared teacher, things are going to go wrong very quickly.

Daft's (2002) book gives a prospective principal a chance to really look at and reflect on the tenets of a true leader trying to establish culture and climate in his/her building. He takes the reader from the question of what it means to be a leader to the leader being a social architect. This is how I have seen education in the past. I have always looked at teaching from a definition point of view. I have then digested that definition and built on it and taken my teaching to the point of being an architect of young people. I believe in order for me to be an effective school leader, I am going to have to follow many of the same paths I have in the past. My effectiveness and ability to establish culture depends on it.

The question that has been posed to all involved in the Leadership Program is, "How will you create a culture of learning in your school building?" This is something I am definitely looking forward to. I have been in some great situations in teaching and some really awful ones. In the great situations, the culture in the building made you want to be there. The principal was always there for the staff whether they needed him/her or not. It was just the comfort that person was going to be there when and if you needed him/her. In return the staff was there for the students. Each level in the building was a model for the next. I think again modeling is the key to a good culture in a building. It all starts with the leader and his/her vision. Starting with my vision, I will model what I initially want. From there I hope the staff gets their cues as to what is expected. I will then give the teachers an opportunity to give some input and offer up some ideas. Together the staff and I can work as one to bring the education to the students. As the process repeats itself, I see the students and the rest of the community fall into a comfort level and the real business of learning can begin.

Kowalski and Reitzig (1993) break the building of school culture into three pieces. The first piece deals with innovations and what Payne and Wolfson (2000) earlier called breaking the ranks in education. I always enjoy reading about going against some of the educational norms. I believe if any success is to be had, norms have to be challenged. This doesn't mean the system is broke; it just needs to be tweaked a little. The second piece deals with power and influence

within a building and how people deal with that. I do not like to use the word power around a school building. I do, however, like the word influence. I know I want to be a positive influence in a school building. "The loving personality seeks not to control but to nurture, not to dominate, but to empower. Humbleness, forgiveness, clarity and love are the foundations of authentic power." (Zukav, 1989, p.233) I believe these two sentences say a lot. The staff should willingly perform because they respect what you are about. This, to me, is the result of positive influence not power play. In the third piece, the values and beliefs of the people in the school community are discussed at length. I think that this has been a forgotten part of school. There is still a lack of students getting out and making the community look good. The pride in school and community has disappeared in many school communities. Students are quick to criticize their community and they never seem to get out and find out what community is all about. From my own experience, I know once some of my students got out into the community; they discovered many things about people they did not know before.

As I head out into the field to my first principalship, I know I will have to work my way through the pieces before I see any success in establishing a school culture. However, I will attack each level the same way I attacked teaching, with fervency, dedication and laughter. The establishment of culture is going to take some time and commitment. I think by combining my ability to communicate and my ability to find new and fresh ideas will keep a staff hopping. The final piece

will be to take a school to the community and selling the ideas to the people who have a major stake in the building and what goes on there.

### Learning Community

Daft (2002) discusses the leader as a person and how that person builds relationships with his or her educational community. Community has always been a part of what I see as important in education. I think the more a person, whether it is a teacher or the principal, gets out into the community, the better. People of all kinds thrive on contact. If they know a face at a party, they feel comfortable and have no problem staying. School should be no different. Students and their parents should feel comfortable about their school so that education is enjoyable and not painful.

I look forward to the day when I can put some of the new ideas I have discovered to work. From Diane Payne (2000) to Richard Daft (2002), many of the authors presented to me have discussed how I, as the building principal, can get the school moving in the right direction. Authors like Erickson (2001) seem to talk about creating a positive learning community. A Community seems to make a school building much more inviting and lends itself to a group effort toward a goal. The Leadership Program has really got me thinking about what I see as a good learning community.

Speck (1999) writes, "Few schools really meet all the needs of diverse communities" (p. 5). The reason why this happens is simple. There are schools

that have no vision, schools that have renegade teachers who undermine the entire process and schools with very selfish people. Because of things like these, schools cannot meet the needs of the people who are most important. Even knowing information like this could scare off a lot of people, but to the dedicated leader, this is just the beginning of a huge challenge. I know I will have to use the heads, hearts and souls of staff to get them to do great or even greater things. I will have to plan and make sure the staff has all of the tools necessary to meet the needs of the diverse community.

With this whole idea of community, I see an opportunity to get parents involved once again in their child's education. Somewhere I think parents were taken out of the loop and it became expected that teachers were responsible for the lives of children. Too often I have heard the words, "That is your job" when trying to discuss the behavior and academic practices of a certain student. With a good learning community, schools can work together with parents to help them get their student through the school process. A good learning community will help parents but not take over in the role of parenting a student. When you look back at incidents such as the atrocious murders at Columbine High School in Colorado, the press seemed to ask first where the teachers went wrong with the students in question. That should not be the first question when looking at any student behavior. Do not get me wrong; teachers have a stake in the deal, but not

the entire stake. All parents ultimately have to hold the majority of the responsibility in the molding of their children.

My accomplishment of a learning community is going to be a lot like what a politician does to get elected. I am going to have to "press the flesh." I know I am going to have to get out into the community and be seen by my stakeholders. This might require some open house type meetings at not only the school but maybe at community centers, churches, coffee houses or even parks. I need to be available for people to ask questions and express their ideas in a forum that is friendly and in a place where others feel comfortable. The key for me will be to listen and communicate where things are going. If one of the stakeholders has a great idea, then I will invite them to get involved and to bring others with them. The ultimate goal is to make sure that, as many people as possible are involved in the education of their community.

#### Vision

The Leadership Program has put into words all the pieces of administration that I really never understood. As I have paged through the book Contemporary School Administration (Kowalski & Reitzig, 1993) I have started to put together a whole thought process of what an ideal administrator is really like. Kowalski and Reitzig (1993) spend a great deal of time in the first chapter of their book talking about leadership. They give a number of definitions of what



good leadership is and then narrows those definitions to create a three-part process that states:

Leadership is defined as a process that (1) results in the determination of organizational objectives and strategies, (2) entails building consensus for meeting those objectives, and (3) involves influencing others to work towards those objectives. (Kowalski & Reitzig, 1993, p. 5)

Now I do not necessarily agree with all that, but the information was enough to get me started. The idea of leadership being a process is what I'm focused on. Too often I have witnessed leaders who do not understand what a collaborative process is and have left their workers with feelings of being left out, or in some cases, feelings of resentment. These leaders choose to go out on their own, make all the decisions and leave everyone else out in the cold. In buildings where this is the philosophy, buildings are very fragmented and cliquish. Teachers end up playing to the leader and the leader ends up playing favorites. The result is no vision, no purpose, and nothing but a group of students and teachers doing their own thing. Education is a process, so why can't leadership be a process? Everything cannot be done at once. Action within a building has to have time to be introduced and work its way through the rough edges. A good leader will be the one who is patient, works his/her way through a process of some sort and brings a group of people to a common goal.

Diane Payne and Terry Wolfson (2000) wrote in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin (NASSP) there needs to be a break in the

ranks of education. What they meant was that the old ways of education need to give way to the new. They say people, who are interested in being great leaders, need to bring a breath of fresh air to the school environment. I do not think I could have said it better myself. For years I have fought against the “old guard” in education. I have always felt that there were new ways out there to help students and it was my duty to use those ways to effectively educate. Time and time again I have been told that I cannot teach the way I want to teach because I was never going to be effective. Each time I heard those words, I worked harder to prove the naysayers wrong.

Already in my experiences I have heard people tell me I am going to have to cave into the old ways to be an effective principal. To this I say, “Not going to happen.” People like Diane Payne and Terry Wolfson (2000) prove that finding new ways to educate students is the way to go. The days of herding children into school and expecting them to sit in a desk and listen to teachers throw facts at them are over. Students of today are looking for something better. For that matter, I think teachers are looking for the same thing. I think they are all looking for value. They want a valuable education or in other words something that holds value in the outside community. Students as well as teachers also want to feel valued in a school building. I was listening to a news program once and the people on the show were talking about a case where a school board over turned a grade for a student because the student felt the grade was unfair. The student was

worried that his/her grade point average was going to suffer. The news anchor interviewed the teacher and I was saddened to see the face of this teacher. She looked like she had lost her best friend. All she could say was how disappointed she was that not one of her superiors backed her. Talk about a lack of value. If I am going to make sure that people are happy in the building I lead, I am going to have to go out of my way, either in a meeting or by ceremony, to insure that everyone in the school feels valued. I know I like to feel valued, so why not staff and students?

A professional vision, I think, starts at an early age. The vision I have carried with me since I was in high school is one that was put there by a group of Jesuit Priests. The Order of Jesuits in the Catholic Church is devoted to training young people for the real world through a regiment of academics and community service. The Jesuits told every young man who walked through the doors of Regis High School in Denver, Colorado, that he would be a "Man for others." This little phrase has meant a great deal to me over the years as I have made it a point to devote my life to being a man for others. I feel this is a great start to a professional vision. However, this statement alone does not make a total vision; so much more is needed.

The North Central Regional Education Laboratory (NCREL, 1990) publishes some helpful information on leadership issues. The information has really helped to set me in the direction of expanding my personal vision. The

laboratory makes a very interesting comment that I think is a good starting point:

“Schools are complex places, and teaching is a difficult and challenging job.”

(NCREL, 1990)

If an educational leader knows this going into a building, he/she should have no problem developing a clear vision. When he/she starts in a building, an educational leader should figure out with what he/she has to work. The leader should immediately get a plan together, because the better the plan, the better the start in the building.

My plan will be in priority order, with a time frame and reflect what I see as the pressing issues for the building. My plan will reflect the research I have done in preparation of the plan. This research will come in the form of interviews of various staff members and data will be collected from the previous administration. My plan will be realistic and in tune with the needs of the staff and students.

Samuel Betances (1992) says, "Educational leaders should set a tone and that tone starts by taking any idea that a person brings to the educational leader's table, respecting it, expanding it, and creating a common spirit for others to follow" (p. 1). I love this idea. To me, this means that a leader needs to have an open ear, an open mind and open heart to teachers as well as students. I think this also means that a tone should be set early and often.

A smooth running building is one in which all the people involved have a very good idea of what is happening. If people are informed and involved in the building process, chances are they will buy into many of the ideas an educational leader puts forth. As I said before once the comfort level reaches a certain point, those very same teachers will begin to introduce their own ideas to the leader. A good leader will respond by listening to the ideas, discussing the ideas with the teachers and taking what is beneficial to the building and putting it to use as a team. Getting teachers and leaders to that point is not that easy, but good people will make every effort to make it work.

Part of my personal vision has already been put to work on a small scale. I am an advisor for our school's Student Senate and, with this group of young people, I make it a point to make sure everyone is heard and everyone contributes. The Senate runs pretty smoothly and most of the students will tell you that they always work harder when they are informed and involved. This is important to students and me because it makes for a very enjoyable environment.

One of the things I want to work on in my tenure, as a principal, is to insure students are learning. I am not talking about the ability of a student to take a test. I am talking about students being prepared to take on the real world outside of school. I am tired of all the talk about tests that will be meaningless to anyone five years down the line. I want to see students get an education they will appreciate for a lifetime. The things I remember most in life are the lessons

learned when I was involved in everyday activities. These were the kind of activities where you got your hands dirty and made some real discoveries. I remember taking classes like Home Economics where the skills I learned in there are still very valuable today. Home Economics is one thing and Language Arts is another. The way I see things, there is no reason why an experience in Language Arts could not be the same as my experience in Home Economics. To get that kind of experience, I know I will have to set out and find a curriculum that is going to, quite possibly boggle the minds of teachers, students and parents.

Many of my professors have shown us the parallels between the corporate world and education. Leaders in both areas are assigned the task of motivating people to success. Taking some leads from both the corporate world and the education world, I will go out and create a winning team that benefits an entire community. Every time I meet with staff, I will find something that reminds them of why they are there. Getting at the inner teacher is not a one shot deal; the process must be continuous and consistent. I feel that it is only then that can eliminate all the problems Speck (1999) speaks of. If things get tough, I will just have to look at some of my own material and remind my self of why I am there. No one ever said this job was going to be easy.

An educational leader's vision better include a great deal of attention devoted to the students, their academics, and their personal well-being. Students are going to be coming to school from all sorts of backgrounds. Each of these

backgrounds brings a whole new set of values and experiences and therefore a whole set of new challenges. It is important that a leader take notice of all the differences in culture, knowledge, and life experiences of students. Betances (1996) says, "If a leader wants students to respond, that leader and his or her staff better understand the background of his or her students" (p. 3). The leader and the staff must apply information given to the students to a world the students understand. Again, this goes back to having a plan and sticking to it. As part of my vision, I see that the world is an ever-changing place; therefore I had better be ready to respond to those changes and move the school in a positive direction where everyone is learning something new and relevant.

As I have progressed in the Educational Leadership program, I am sure my vision has expanded. It's just a matter of time before I secure a principalship. This means my vision had better be clear. A lack of a clear vision will cost students and staff the chance to work in a comfortable environment. In the end, an unclear vision might cost me a job. I am confident that the leadership program has fulfilled my needs and is sending me out to a building fully prepared.

#### Conclusion: Bringing it all together

Educational leadership was the goal that I set for myself when I began the Educational Leadership Program. That will continue to be part of my future goals as long as I am in the world of education. Along the way in this program I have had to answer the questions of my peers as well as the questions I had for myself.

It is only after all the questions have been answered with confidence and knowledge that the goal will be met. I look forward to the challenge and I am excited about the prospects ahead. There is so much I have learned and so much I want to try. No person can truly appreciate what this all means unless he/she, too, goes through this process. This process has been exciting because it has been a team of people helping me toward a goal. The end result of this process will come when I am putting a vision to work that involves the education of students, their parents, the surrounding community, but importantly the staff who educate that same school community. It is a vision I know many will be glad to see.



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